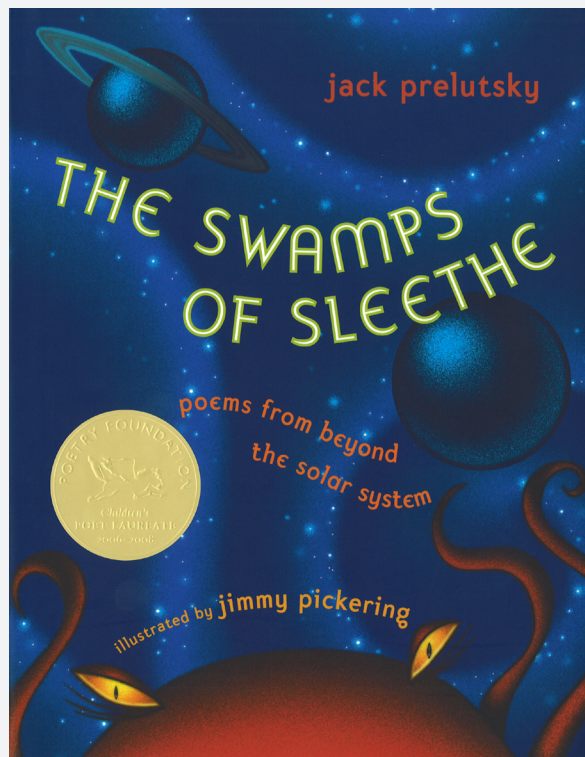


Second Reaction: Earthlings' Reactions to Prelutsky's *The Swamps of Sleethe*

Prelutsky, Jack. Illus. Jimmy Pickering. *The Swamps of Sleethe: Poems from Beyond the Solar System*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2009.

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The Swamps of Sleethe: Poems from Beyond the Solar System, is a poetry book written by the 2006-2008 Children's Poet Laureate, Jack Prelutsky, and illustrated by Jimmy Pickering. I decided that a good way to review a children's poetry book would be by reading it aloud to members of the recommended audience (8-12 year olds).

I found a couple of eight-year-olds who sat and listened respectfully as I read the entire book aloud. Afterwards, I asked them what they thought. They said it was "freaky and scary." When I asked what specifically was freaky and scary, they said, "Everything. The pictures and words." One child confessed, "I know it's not a true book, but it might give me nightmares." I tried to explain that some of the words were scrambled and when unscrambled they reveal

some other aspect of the planet, but they weren't very interested. I decided to sample the other end of the recommended age range.

I found five seventh graders (11-13 year olds) to whom I also read aloud the entire book. Their reaction was very different. They laughed at the art and exclaimed, *"The pictures are cool."* *"The book has great illustrations."* They asked me questions about the vocabulary and found the rhymes helpful in deciphering the words. They made comments such as: *"I really like the rhymes and interesting words."* *"Sounds like a tongue-twister."* *"I appreciate the rhyming without simplifying the words."* *"It is a high vocabulary book."* The seventh graders also tried hard to figure out the anagrams. One student found that to be his favorite part. He said, *"I like the game they have with the word scramble. No, I love the anagrams!"*

I asked the seventh graders what they thought the book was about, one student responded, *"It's about outer space and the poems make outer space seem very interesting."* Another student said, *"It seems like it is mostly about danger from different types of monsters and about a variety of ways to die. Definitely not a plus in my eyes, so I think that this book should be for a more mature audience."* When I followed up with the question, "How do you feel about the final poem and how the words and illustrations depict planet Earth as gloomy and possibly not any better than any of the other planets?" A couple of children said that they recognized it was Earth just from the illustrations and that the pictures and words were an honest portrayal because they agree that there are some *"not-so positive"* things about our planet. I asked them how that made them feel. They said it makes them *"want to change that and make Earth better."*

Overall, the seventh graders found the book to be *"very creative"* and they thought that *"the author has a great imagination."* Although I'm much older than the recommended audience, I agree with the children's assessment. This book of dark yet imaginative, clever poetry and attention-grabbing illustrations is for individuals who take pleasure in cynical humor, who appreciate vibrant illustrations and are not easily troubled by some disquieting images, who like to discover and ponder the layers of meaning camouflaged within poems, who enjoy solving word-play games, and who like to imagine the endless possibilities of what may be found on yet-to-be-explored planets beyond the solar system. The rhyme and rhythm of the poems make for an excellent and fun read-aloud book. *The Swamps of Sleethe* is a book that juvenile and even older Earthlings can enjoy.

About the Author

Adriana L. Medina is Assistant Professor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her areas of interest are adolescent literacy, teacher education, and educational program evaluation. She is an avid reader of young adult literature because she intends to remain, if nothing else, young at heart!